

P 261314Z MAY 98
FM AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6898
INFO AMCONSUL KARACHI
AMCONSUL PESHAWAR
AMCONSUL MUMBAI
AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI
AMEMBASSY LONDON

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISLAMABAD 003858

E.O. 12958: DECL: 5/25/08
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [MNUC](#) [IN](#) [PK](#)
SUBJECT: BENAZIR PROMISES MODERATION ON NUCLEAR TESTING

REF: LAHORE 310

CLASSIFIED BY LAHORE PRINCIPAL OFFICER GEOFFREY R. PYATT, REASON
1.5 (D)

THIS IS LAHORE 315

11. (C) SUMMARY: MEETING MAY 25 WITH PRINCIPAL OFFICER, FORMER PRIME MINISTER BENAZIR BHUTTO SAID SHE WOULD NO LONGER PRESS THE GOVERNMENT TO TEST ITS NUCLEAR CAPABILITY. THERE MAY HAVE BEEN A TIME FOR A DETONATION, BENAZIR ARGUED, BUT AT THIS STAGE A TEST WOULD BE COUNTER TO PAKISTAN'S INTERESTS. INSTEAD, SHE SAID, THE PPP WILL REDIRECT ITS CRITICISM OF NAWAZ SHARIF TO FOCUS ON THE GOVERNMENT'S "INDECISION" AND "MISMANAGEMENT." BENAZIR ARGUED THAT MAY 11 WAS A TURNING POINT IN PAKISTAN'S HISTORY WHICH REQUIRES A FUNDAMENTAL RETHINKING OF THE COUNTRY'S SECURITY STRATEGY. SHE PREDICTED THAT NAWAZ MAY HAVE TO BE "SACRIFICED" IN ORDER TO HEAL THE WOUNDED PRIDE OF PAKISTAN'S MILITARY. PRINCIPAL OFFICER CAUTIONED THAT BENAZIR'S BELLICOSE REACTION TO INDIA'S TESTS HAD DRAWN HARSH CRITICISM IN THE WEST AND SUGGESTED THAT THE PPP STATE PUBLICLY THAT TESTING IS TOO IMPORTANT TO BE USED AS A POLITICAL FOOTBALL. BENAZIR DISAVOWED HER WIDELY-REPRINTED OP-ED CALLING FOR A PREEMPTIVE MILITARY STRIKE ON INDIA, CLAIMING THAT SHE INVOKED THIS POSSIBILITY ONLY TO ILLUSTRATE THE RANGE OF OPTIONS AVAILABLE -- NOT AS A RECOMMENDATION FOR ACTION. ASKED ABOUT NEXT STEPS IN THE INDO-PAK DIALOGUE, SHE RECOMMENDED A COOLING-OFF PERIOD FOLLOWED BY NEGOTIATIONS TO RATIFY THE CURRENT DIVISION OF KASHMIR. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) PRINCIPAL OFFICER MET MAY 25 AT HER REQUEST WITH FORMER PRIME MINISTER BENAZIR BHUTTO, WHO WAS IN LAHORE FOR AN APPEARANCE BEFORE THE HIGH COURT'S ACCOUNTABILITY BENCH. SHE WAS JOINED BY PPP PROVINCIAL PRESIDENT RAO SIKANDER IQBAL AND COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR QASIM ZIA. THIS MEETING FOLLOWED SEVERAL CONVERSATIONS IN WHICH PPP LEADERS HAVE CLAIMED TO HAVE ACCEPTED OUR ARGUMENTS IN FAVOR OF RESTRAINT (REFTEL) AND TO HAVE CONVINCED BENAZIR TO SOFTEN HER RHETORIC. SENATE OPPOSITION LEADER AITZAZ AHSAN WENT SO FAR AS TO CLAIM ON MAY 24 THAT BENAZIR HAD "TAKEN A U-TURN" AND OPENLY OPPOSED NUCLEAR TESTING IN RECENT PPP LEADERSHIP MEETINGS.

BACK FROM THE BRINK

13. (C) ASKED ABOUT PRESS REPORTS THAT SHE HAD URGED NATION-WIDE DEMONSTRATIONS IN FAVOR OF TESTING, BENAZIR CLAIMED THAT NO ONE IN THE PPP WOULD CALL FOR TESTING FROM NOW ON. THE MOMENT HAS PASSED. WE UNDERSTAND THAT A TEST NOW WOULD HAVE A DISASTROUS IMPACT ON PAKISTAN'S ECONOMY AND INTERNATIONAL REPUTATION. I CANNOT SAY THESE THINGS PUBLICLY, BENAZIR SAID, BUT NEITHER WILL I CALL FOR A DETONATION. AT THE OPPOSITION'S MAY 21 HYDERABAD RALLY, SHE NOTED, THE LINES THAT GOT THE MOST APPLAUSE WERE NOT TAHIR-UL-QADRI'S CALL FOR NUCLEAR TESTING, BUT HER OWN ATTACKS ON NAWAZ SHARIF'S ECONOMIC LEADERSHIP AND MANHOOD. WHEN PRESSED ON THE PPP'S POSTURE, BENAZIR CONCEDED THAT EVEN IF SHE WANTED TO MAKE A PUBLIC STATEMENT AGAINST TESTING SHE COULD NOT, SINCE THIS WOULD BE ATTACKED BY OTHER MEMBERS OF THE OPPOSITION ALLIANCE. WE WERE DRIVEN INTO THIS ALLIANCE BECAUSE THE GOVERNMENT REFUSED TO DEAL WITH US A LEGITIMATE OPPOSITION IN PARLIAMENT -- SO NOW WE MUST LIVE WITH THE CONSEQUENCES.

14. (C) MAY 11 WAS A TURNING POINT IN PAKISTAN'S HISTORY, BENAZIR SAID. WE HAVE TO RETHINK HOW WE DEFINE OUR SECURITY AND HOW WE

LOOK AT INDIA. ACCORDING TO MY SOURCES, BENAZIR CONTINUED, THE MILITARY LEADERSHIP UNDERSTANDS THESE CHANGED CIRCUMSTANCES AND IS IN NO HURRY TO TEST A NUCLEAR DEVICE. HOWEVER, AT LOWER LEVELS OF THE MILITARY THERE IS A FEELING OF WOUNDED PRIDE SIMILAR TO SENTIMENTS AFTER THE 1971 LOSS OF BANGLADESH. "I'M AFRAID NAWAZ MAY EVENTUALLY HAVE TO BE SACRIFICED TO HEAL THAT SENSE OF SHAME," BENAZIR ADDED, "BUT IT'S HARD TO IMAGINE WHO MIGHT TAKE HIS PLACE."

15. (C) EVEN IF I AM NOT CALLING FOR A NUCLEAR TEST, BENAZIR SUGGESTED, NAWAZ SHARIF WILL REMAIN VULNERABLE TO CRITICISMS OF HIS INDECISION IN THE FACE OF INDIA'S AGGRESSION. "NAWAZ IS TRYING TO PUT HANDCUFFS ON ME," BENAZIR QUIPPED, "BUT I'M GOING TO PUT BANGLES ON HIM." (NOTE: BY SUGGESTING THAT NAWAZ WEARS BANGLES, AS SHE DID IN HYDERABAD, BENAZIR IS QUESTIONING HIS MASCULINITY -- A DEEP INSULT IN THIS SOCIETY.)

SHIFTING THE DEBATE

16. (C) IF THE PPP HAS DECIDED NUCLEAR TESTING WOULD BE AGAINST THE COUNTRY'S BEST INTERESTS, PRINCIPAL OFFICER SUGGESTED, THEN IT WOULD BE HELPFUL TO MAKE THIS POINT PUBLICLY. SO FAR IN THIS DEBATE, THE OPPOSITION HAS APPEARED TO BE MOTIVATED MORE BY POLITICS THAN BY NATIONAL INTERESTS. AT THE VERY LEAST, THE PPP SHOULD SIGNAL TO THE GOVERNMENT THAT THE PARTY HAS DECIDED THIS ISSUE IS TOO IMPORTANT TO BE TREATED AS A POLITICAL FOOTBALL. BENAZIR WAS INTRIGUED BY THIS SUGGESTION AND INSTRUCTED HER COLLEAGUES TO FOLLOW-UP.

17. (C) PRINCIPAL OFFICER ALSO QUESTIONED BENAZIR ON HER MAY 17 LOS ANGELES TIMES OP-ED, WHICH CONCLUDED BY DANGLING THE POSSIBILITY OF A PREEMPTIVE STRIKE ON INDIA IN RESPONSE TO THE TESTS. BENAZIR DISAVOWED THIS INTERPRETATION, CLAIMING THE PIECE WAS DRAFTED TO ILLUSTRATE POSSIBLE RESPONSES, NOT AS A PRESCRIPTION FOR ACTION. ACTUALLY, BENAZIR SAID, THE IDEA CAME FROM ROBERT MCNAMARA, WHO SUGGESTED WHEN I WAS IN LONDON THAT A PREEMPTIVE STRIKE WOULD BE ONE OPTION UNDER CONSIDERATION IF THE UNITED STATES WAS FACED WITH A SIMILAR THREAT.

18. (C) ASKED ABOUT NEXT STEPS IN THE INDO-PAK DIALOGUE, BENAZIR SUGGESTED THERE WOULD HAVE TO BE A COOLING OFF PERIOD OF SEVERAL MONTHS, AFTER WHICH NEGOTIATIONS COULD BEGIN TO MAKE THE LINE OF CONTROL A PERMANENT BORDER. GIVEN THE NEW STRATEGIC REALITIES, DIVIDING KASHMIR WOULD SEEM TO BE THE ONLY OPTION. SHE ASSUMED THAT WESTERN SUPPORT FOR PAKISTAN'S NUCLEAR RESTRAINT WOULD EVENTUALLY BE FOLLOWED BY PRESSURE TO COME CLEAN AND ADHERE TO THE CTBT AND NPT. PRINCIPAL OFFICER REPLIED THAT DECISIONS ON NATIONAL SECURITY WILL HAVE TO BE ANSWERED BY THE PAKISTANIS, NOT BY OUTSIDE POWERS. WE HOPE THE DEBATE OVER PAKISTAN'S SECURITY WILL INCLUDE THE WIDEST POSSIBLE SWATH OF POLITICAL OPINION, BUT THAT DEPENDS ON A MORE CIVILIZED DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE PML AND PPP.

9 COMMENT: BENAZIR REMAINS FIRMLY FOCUSED ON THE GOAL OF DRIVING NAWAZ SHARIF FROM OFFICE, AND IT WOULD BE OUT OF CHARACTER FOR HER TO PASS UP AN OPPORTUNITY TO EAT AWAY AT HIS PUBLIC BASE. HOWEVER, UNLIKE MOST IN THE OPPOSITION, SHE UNDERSTANDS THE LASTING DAMAGE THAT WOULD BE DONE BY A NUCLEAR TEST, AND APPEARS GENUINE IN HER VIEW THAT PAKISTAN SHOULD NOT NOW TEST. CRITICISM FROM HER MORE COURAGEOUS PARTY COLLEAGUES AND ADVISERS IN THE U.S. MAY ALSO HAVE HELPED TO MODERATE HER OPINION. THIS SHIFT MAY BUY THE GOVERNMENT A LITTLE MANEUVERING ROOM, BUT NOT MUCH. INDEED, BENAZIR'S NEW TACTIC OF QUESTIONING NAWAZ' MANHOOD MAY PROVE A POWERFUL CATALYST TOWARDS THE NUCLEAR TEST THAT SHE NOW CLAIMS TO OPPOSE.

SIMONS